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FILE ONLY

U.S. Warns Latin Officers on Perils of Drug Trade

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WASHINGTON, June 13 — A senior State Department official today warned a group of Latin American military officers against involvement in narcotics trafficking, saying the illegal drug business was "rapidly becoming a regionwide menace."

The remarks, in a speech by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, came a

day after The New York Times reported that evidence gathered by American intelligence officials showed that the Panamanian armed forces chief, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, had been extensively involved in illicit money laundering and narcotics activities.

Speaking to a graduating class of officers at the Inter-American Defense College, Mr. Abrams made no mention of Panama or of General Noriega. But

he denounced drug trafficking and those who engage in it, telling the officers, "Their growing power and the corruption it breeds endangers not only civilian institutions but yours."

"You and your fellow military officers must guard your institution against this cancer," Mr. Abrams said. "You must be relentless in fighting the traffickers. Your institutions, your honor, and the freedom of your societies are at stake."

Mr. Abrams also emphasized what he termed "an extraordinary period" in which "democracy is on the rise in our hemisphere."

"Gone are the days when the coup d'état was an option that could be exercised without local or international costs by military leaders arrogating to themselves the right to decide for their nation," he said. "Your highest calling must be not to replace failed regimes, but to protect successful democracies."

He warned that the "enlargement of military forces to protect democratic institutions can threaten those very institutions when the military dwarfs civilian institutions and assumes some of their functions."

General Noriega, widely considered to be the most powerful figure in Panama, was to have attended the ceremony at which Mr. Abrams spoke, according to a diplomat familiar with the general's schedule, but he left the United States early Thursday after the publication of the Times article.

Despite Mr. Abrams's warning, there was no indication from American officials that the Reagan Administration planned any action against Panama, which has key military value to the United States.

In the past, the United States Government and reports in the American press have linked officials in several Latin nations with drug trafficking. The Reagan Administration has accused the Government of Nicaragua of drug trafficking, and recent charges by some Administration officials that Mexican officials were involved in the drug trade created tension between the two countries. Colombia has also been a target of such accusations.

In articles on Thursday and today, The Times reported that American officials had learned that General Noriega had also conveyed intelligence information to Cuba and that law enforcement officials in the Nixon Administration had proposed that the general be assassinated.

The State Department spokesman, Bernard Kalb, had no comment today on calls in Congress for an investigation. Representative Gerry E. Studds, Democrat of Massachusetts, said Thursday that the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee would look into the charges.